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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000299

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SPEAKER PROMISES DOMESTIC BREAKTHROUGHS IN JUNE
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Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) On April 27 EUR DAS Matthew Brzya met with National Assembly Speaker Hovik Abrahamian to discuss progress on normalization of relations between Turkey and Armenia. Abrahamian said he fully supported President Sargsian's move to normalize ties, and would actively promote its benefits to Armenian society. He said that the agreement would expose the President politically, and urged the United States to support Sargsian at this critical juncture, specifically by fully funding the MCC program. The Speaker also promised a breakthrough on the political detainees issue by late June, which would free Armenia's hand to make even more progress on Turkey and the NK conflict. DAS Brzya said he welcomed the Speaker's support on Turkey-Armenia, and that the United States was ready to use all of its prestige to further support the breakthrough. He said the United States was committed to the MCC program, and that Armenia's authorities should view the program as a way to restore public trust. Bryza stressed that the promised breakthroughs should come sooner rather than later, in view of the upcoming June MCC Board meeting in Washington. END SUMMARY.

PARLIAMENT SUPPORTS PRESIDENT SARGSIAN'S DIPLOMACY

2. (C) On April 27, EUR DAS Matthew Bryza met with National Assembly Speaker Hovik Abrahamian to brief him on his recent efforts to broker the Turkish-Armenia road map agreed by Ankara and Yerevan on April 23. Abrahamian expressed Armenia's gratitude to DAS Brzya and the U.S. Government for actively promoting regional stability and security. He said he fully supported President Sargsian's brave move on the Armenia-Turkey agreement on a road map to normalize relations, which was announced April 23. He appreciated DAS Bryza's highlighting that normalization of Armenia-Turkey ties and settlement of the NK conflict were separate processes that nevertheless would positively affect each other. The Speaker said the National Assembly fully supported Armenia-Turkey normalization, that it saw no linkage between the April 22 joint statement and the issue of recognizing the Armenian Genocide, and opined that normalized ties with Turkey would finally connect Armenia to Europe and reduce Armenia's dependency on Georgia. Abrahamian declared that normalized ties with Turkey would benefit all Armenian citizens in concrete ways, for example in the reduction of the cost of imported items, whose shipping costs would be reduced several times by coming through Turkey instead of Georgia.

PRESIDENT IN A DIFFICULT SPOT

¶3. (C) Abrahamian cautioned, however, that the new agreement has complicated President Sargsian's domestic political situation. He noted that just an hour before the meeting the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party (ARF; aka Dashnaks), a junior member of the four-party ruling coalition, had decided to leave the coalition in protest of the agreement. The Speaker stated that President Sargsian had known the Dashnaks might bolt the coalition if he backed the agreement, but took the risk anyway because of his conviction that normalized ties were in the interest of Armenia's people. Abrahamian said the President had been taking heat since last fall, when he invited Turkish President Gul to Yerevan for a Turkey-Armenia soccer match. He added that the "radical opposition" also sought to take advantage of the issuance of the joint statement on April 22, arguing that President Sargsian backed it in order to help President Obama avoid having to use the word "genocide" in his April 24 statement.

¶4. (C) The Speaker stressed that for normalization to be successful, there would have to be some quick, positive developments, such as the border opening, and that Turkey would have to deliver to keep Armenia supportive of the normalization process. He told DAS Bryza that he planned an active discussion of the road map's contents by the National Assembly, and that he had already agreed with Foreign Minister Nalbandian that the latter come to Parliament to explain the agreed plan to party faction leaders. Abrahamian said that he would energize the National Assembly so that its members would actively discuss and publicize the road map, explain it to the public and win understanding and support of President Sargsian's initiative. Abrahamian stated that it was time to "prepare" society to understand the authorities' viewpoints on normalization of ties.

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¶5. (C) DAS Bryza commended the Speaker on his planned outreach efforts, and concurred it was time to pursue this in the light of real chances for normalization or Armenia-Turkey ties. Brzya thought that the opposition's criticism of the agreement ran counter to Armenia's national interests, as the agreement and normalized ties would result in the concrete improvement of almost every Armenians, life. Bryza noted that the criticism likely was more of a short-term election tactic -- with Yerevan's first ever City Council election looming on May 31 -- than the true thinking of the opposition, which had supported normalization of ties without preconditions when it was in power in the 1990s.

ACKNOWLEDGE SARGSIAN'S RISK-TAKING BY SUPPORTING HIM

¶6. (C) Abrahamian said that the Europeans and the United States should support President Sargsian in view of his support of the agreement and the complications it had created for his political position. Abrahamian stressed that Sargsian backed the agreement even though he knew it would compromise his domestic image. On top of the complications posed by the agreement, President Sargsian was also facing the mounting local effects of the global economic crisis and "other circumstances" at home. (Note: We assume Abrahamian meant by "other circumstances" the continued imprisonment of approximately 60 opposition supporters. End Note)

¶7. (C) Abrahamian said one way the U.S. could support Sargsian now was by restoring full funding to the MCC program. The Speaker noted that if the MCC was truly an assistance program and not a political tool, the Armenian people should not be punished for the "actions of the authorities." The Speaker said that President Sargsian was personally committed to funding MCC projects even if the United States chose not to restore the funds it had suspended, and that Sargsian would see to it that Armenia carry out the entire program, even if it takes longer to implement than would otherwise be the case with full U.S.

funding. Abrahamian added that full USG support of the MCC would testify to a "warming-up" of US-Armenian ties.

¶8. (C) DAS Bryza agreed that the United States wished success for the MCC program in Armenia, and acknowledged the importance of the program in bettering the lives of Armenians. But he also told the Speaker that it was a vehicle with which the authorities could regain the people's trust. He highlighted to Abrahamian that the purpose of establishing an MCC Compact was to affirm that the country in question shared with the United States a commitment to expanding political and economic freedom. The MCC Board would decide whether to continue the rural roads program in Armenia on the basis of its assessment of whether Armenia was fulfilling democracy and human rights criteria (e.g., ruling justly).

¶9. (C) Abrahamian said that while President Sargsian is committed to democratization, it will take time for democracy to evolve in Armenia. He said the president was committed to resolving domestic issues peacefully, is open to compromise, and does not seek to force his will on others. But cultivating compromise in Armenia is not easy, and President Sargsian needs help to achieve his vision and implement his priorities. Abrahamian reiterated that he and the National Assembly stand behind the president, and will become more active reaching out to society as a mediator between society and the authorities. Abrahamian said he wanted to make the National Assembly a forum for the expression of diverse viewpoints in this regard, and said he viewed criticism and debate as a healthy means to achieve an optimal result.

¶10. (C) DAS Brzya commended President Sargsian as a bold leader who is often willing to compromise -- as his personal support of the Armenia-Turkey agreement showed. Brzya also stated that the National Assembly's support of President Sargsian's statesmanship through debates and public discussions would be healthy indicators of a democratic approach to the issue. Bryza promised the Speaker that the U.S. Government would strongly support the Armenia-Turkey agreement, and would actively work to show that the agreement would positively affect negotiations on the NK conflict. Bryza said he was already starting to explain the USG's view and its support of the agreement to Armenia's public.

SPEAKER PREDICTS JUNE BREAKTHROUGHS ON DETAINEES

¶11. (C) Bryza expressed hope that President Sargsian would duplicate his boldness and compromise on foreign policy

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issues in the domestic arena, and urged Armenia's authorities to promptly seek a legal way out of the detainees issue. Brzya noted that 21 of the 55 political detainees have already served one-third of their sentences, which makes them eligible for early release provided they possess a record of good conduct while in confinement. Bryza said such a release would send a positive "shock wave" through Armenian politics.

¶12. (C) Abrahamian said he personally regretted the March 1 events of 2008, and that both Armenia and President Sargsian had lost a year to move forward on development and democratization. He confided to Bryza that he has discussed the release issue with president, but said he was opposed to amnesty, and would oppose it if brought before the parliament. He said it was necessary for all of the court cases underway to finish before an early release could be considered.

¶13. (C) The Speaker insisted that the authorities did not want anybody spending more time in jail than necessary, but that all of the court hearings were set to finish by late June -- and that this would be the "best timing" for a

release. (Note: The Speaker joked to DAS Bryza and the Ambassador that "sometimes my opinion reflects what really happens later." End Note) Abrahamian added that by the end of June "everything will be clear," and the authorities will then be prepared to do more on Turkey, the NK conflict and improving the economy.

YEREVAN ELECTION TO BE CLEAN, BUT SEEKS EMBASSY'S HELP

¶14. (C) Abrahamian complained that the "radical opposition" was doing everything to blemish the upcoming May 31 Yerevan city council election (in which Yerevan's mayor will be indirectly elected), that it would undertake provocative activities, and that the authorities "have to do our best to prevent this." He declared that Yerevan's citizens understand that opposition leader -- and former president -- Levon Ter-Petrossian cannot be a successful mayor, and that what the city really needs is a manager, not a politician who only knows how to talk. Abrahamian predicted that the ruling coalition will net 70-80 percent of the vote and be able to work together within the council to address Yerevan's issues, boasting that "we (the ruling Republican Party) always share our successes with our partners." He promised that the authorities will do everything to ensure a free and fair election.

¶15. (C) Abrahamian then appealed to Ambassador Yovanovitch to ensure that justice prevails in the election, that the Embassy be wary of opposition provocations, and that she personally point out to the Armenian public when provocations take place. The Speaker reiterated President Sargsian's commitment to democratization, but stated that "we need your assistance" during the election period. He said he would be the first to mention if "there are any mistakes" made during the election. He then affirmed that "it will be President Sargsian who will normalize relations with Turkey and settle the NK conflict." The Speaker then opined that "if you see a country trying to make things better in the region, the United States should help it."

¶16. (C) DAS Brzya welcomed the Speaker's prediction that positive developments on the detainees issue were imminent, and expressed hope that the breakthroughs would indeed materialize. But while he acknowledged that approving a presidential amnesty of detainees was the Speaker's prerogative, DAS Bryza urged the Speaker to help arrive at a solution that would be taken sooner rather than later, even before late June. Ambassador Yovanovitch emphasized to the Speaker that the MCC board members who would be meeting in June to discuss Armenia would be expecting some positive developments by then, and joined DAS Bryza in urging an earlier release of the detainees.

¶17. (U) EUR DAS Bryza cleared this cable.

YOVANOVITCH